

# A Question of Character

by Douglas Hackleman

**T**he Ellen G. White Estate representatives continue to demonstrate their disdain for candid history and for the right of church members to acquire a realistic and thorough understanding of the most significant figure in their religious roots. In this instance, the Seventh-day Adventist historical discovery of the decade—if not the century—is being studiously ignored by the Ellen G. White Estate.

If we weren't already so well acquainted with how thinking is done at the White Estate, it would seem absolutely astonishing that people who place such a great degree of importance on Mrs. White are so disinterested in the earliest, contemporary, public, eyewitness descriptions of her in-and-out-of-vision conduct.

The discovery in question is an extended New England newspaper account (The *Piscataquis Farmer*, 7 March 1845) of the arrest and trial of one of Ellen Harmon's friends, Israel Dammon (see this issue page 18). Dammon had been arrested on the Sunday morning of February 16, 1845, during a Millerite meeting at a home in Atkinson, Maine. Ellen Harmon was present at the arrest, and fifteen years later (1860) described Dammon's apprehension and subsequent trial (which she did not attend) in *Spiritual Gifts* volume two.

In the 124 column-inch *Farmer* abridgment of the testimony of the thirty-eight witnesses who testified at Dammon's trial (twenty against, eighteen for), there are numerous incidental references to the activities of two visionaries who were present at the Saturday evening meeting that preceded Dammon's Sunday arrest; one of them was Ellen Harmon of Portland, Maine.

La Sierra professor of history and political science, Frederick Hoyt, ran across the *Farmer* account in 1983 while researching the beginning of Adventism in Maine but did not share his find publicly until it was published in *Spectrum* in August 1987.

One-time Andrews University Seminary graduate student Bruce Weaver (a casualty of the Glacier View era) "discovered" the same article in March of 1986 independently of Hoyt. The reading of Mrs. White's remarkable *Spiritual Gifts* 2 account of Dammon's arrest and trial had stimulated Weaver's search for any mention of it in Maine newspapers. His article in this issue represents a painstaking effort to bring the available evidence to bear on a comparison of the two

versions—that of the thirty-eight witnesses at Dammon's trial, under oath, and that of Mrs. White fifteen years later, (ostensibly) under inspiration.

Several of the sworn eyewitnesses described the activities of Ellen Harmon on the evening of 15 February 1845, within four months of the great disappointment, and only days following an Exeter, Maine, meeting

December 1, 1886. Wrote Olson:

"I read the document through at once but found nothing in it which, in my opinion, required an explanatory statement from the White Estate. The other staff members agreed with me. The republication of the [Farmer] article in the August, 1987, issue of *Spectrum* has resulted in further discussion of the matter by our staff, but we still feel that a

*The SDA historical discovery of the decade — if not the century — is being studiously ignored by the Ellen G. White Estate.*

(also with Dammon) at which she later recalled having had her first vision of the Bridegroom moving from the holy to the most holy place in the heavenly sanctuary.

But the White Estate is not interested in what the witnesses had to say, much less in sharing its perspective on the document with Seventh-day Adventists today. In a 21 October 1987 memo to the trustees, staff, and research center directors of the White Estate, Robert Olson indicated that he had "received a complimentary copy of this [7 March *Piscataquis Farmer*] newspaper article" on

formal response by the White Estate is not needed."

Olson uses the rest of his three-and-a-half-page memo to discuss with his colleagues "three aspects of the account that" he believes "might, to some minds, call into question Ellen Harmon's activities or character." But the problem with the account that is of serious concern is not among his "three aspects." Olson does not even hint at the organic contradiction between the account of

(concluded on page 47)



Donald Muth practices his fine, artistic craft in Sedona, Arizona. His cover rendering contributes to the unmaking of a longstanding Adventist myth.

Dammon's arrest provided at the trial (and challenged by none of the eighteen friendly witnesses) and Mrs. White's later account of his arrest. (More about that below.)

Two of the "three aspects" of the story that Olson raises for discussion with his colleagues are straw men that he therefore handles easily enough: the fact that Ellen Harmon attended a meeting at which fanatical

*Spectrum* readers have long ago become cynical about the integrity of the White Estate. Olson's memo is coercive evidence that their cynicism is well founded. And then, too, many *Spectrum* readers could not care less about Ellen White.

On those two grounds Olson should be very careful about what he deduces from the fact that only two *Spectrum* readers wrote the

stories of the miraculous that Mrs. White claims attended her ministry. In almost every such story where contemporary documentation is available, the evidence is either extremely weak, or (worse) it contradicts the story, or (still worse) it suggests that there has been an attempt to fabricate evidence to sustain the story. The evidence for this instance is provided in Weaver's article "Incident in Atkinson."

Among others, the disparity between Ellen White's stories and what the evidence so often suggests raises the same kind of questions that have caused two candidates for the presidency to drop out of the race for their party's nomination—the question of character.

Are accounts of events given under inspiration as reliable as accounts provided under oath? In the case of Israel Dammon's arrest and trial, clearly not. At the very least the story bears out the conventional wisdom of historians who recognize that contemporary accounts are more dependable than later reminiscences.

To save inspiration's good name, or rather Ellen White's, Olson might argue—as he has elsewhere—that this or that Ellen White statement was not inspired. But Olson and other White Estate apologists have made it clear repeatedly that it is the person who is inspired, not their thoughts or words. Inspiration, they argue, is not something that can be turned on or off. Neither, they contend, are there any "degrees" of inspiration.

Not once in "official" Adventist publications of this decade has *Currents* seen any ref-

*"We doubt that she was quoted correctly when she was alleged to have said that 'they would go to hell' . . . ." — Robert Olson*

activities were manifested; and the fact that she lay on the floor for several hours in the middle of that meeting.

Olson's third "aspect," that "Ellen Harmon allegedly advised certain individuals to be rebaptized that night or they would go to hell," is more problematic and he trips badly over it. He seems to be perfectly comfortable with Miss Harmon's theology of rebaptism (even citing her manuscript 5, 1850, to support it)—that those who were not rebaptized will die the second death. But he cannot believe that the sensitive Miss Harmon would use the words "go to hell" to describe that awful death:

"We doubt that she was quoted correctly when she was alleged to have said that 'they would go to hell' if they were not baptized that evening. Her writings are not characterized by such severe language." ('Not really surprising. Even ordinary people are more circumspect when they write for publication than when they speak.)

Olson is more comfortable with a euphemism: "She might have said that they would 'lose their souls,' or something similar. The witness could easily have used his own more colorful language when testifying as to what Ellen had said." (Yup, he could have; but he wasn't alone. Actually three witness—two of them friendly—attributed precisely those words to Ellen in four instances and in regard to several sinners.)

Before leaving Olson to his imagination, his conclusions need to be corrected. He sums up:

"In the three months that have elapsed since *Spectrum* republished the newspaper account of Israel Dammon's trial the White Estate has received only two inquiries about the matter. Apparently our church members consider the account of little significance."

One of the gifts that separates men from animals and some men from other men is the ability to draw valid inferences from established facts. Given the White Estate track record, why would a *Spectrum* reader write to the White Estate about anything? Most

White Estate inquiring about the Dammon matter and even more careful about generalizing from his deductions. Instead he plunges forward, equating *Spectrum* readers with "our church members"—as if *Spectrum* readers were a representative sample of the Adventist church membership. (This will come as a shock to Roy Branson.) Olson seems to know nothing about population statistics or valid polling procedures.

To help Olson understand what he doesn't seem to understand the question might be posed: How many letters inquiring about the Dammon affair would the White Estate have received if the *Piscataquis Farmer* article had been reprinted (per impossible) in the *Adventist Review*?

If we have seemed too hard on the White Estate director, keep in mind that the alterna-

*The disparity between Ellen White's stories and what the evidence so often suggests raises the question of character.*

tive to revealing the disorderliness of his analysis would be to suggest that he has been disingenuous in his recent memo to the White Estate family.

Actually, of much more concern than Olson's lame attempt to disbelieve the witnesses who said Miss Harmon used the words "go to hell," or the "looking glass" logic he employs when suggesting that Adventist church members consider the account of little significance, is his failure to even mention the fundamental problem raised by the *Piscataquis Farmer* account of the arrest and trial of Israel Dammon. Is it possible that Olson didn't notice the fundamental contradiction between the account of the sworn witnesses and Mrs. White's SG2 (and only) retrospective?

The contradiction that Olson ignores illustrates again the problem that dogs so many

ference to the traditional "tests" of a prophet—not since Ellen White's literary "habit" became widely known. In fact, Mrs. White fails in various instances all of those traditional tests. And so the White Estate representatives have taken to arguing that the biblical prophets similarly fail. No doubt Olson also has some scriptural examples indicating that Old Testament characters misrepresented reality. But unlike White Estate publications, the wonderful fact is that such stories are candidly preserved in the biblical narratives.

*Currents* would like to put forward a new test or criterion for distinguishing the genuinely inspired from the spurious—the test of candor. But one can see where that would leave Ellen White and the literary estate that bears her name.